

WHEN

1 Family + 1 Family



= 1 Family

Although blending two families can be challenging, it can also be rich and rewarding.

By Brenda Thompson Engeler

Both my husband and I had been married before, so when we married each other, we found ourselves trying to merge two families. Marty had a daughter who attended an out-of-state college, and I had two teenage daughters and a son who had just received his mission call. We knew that blending our families would be a challenging task, so we tried to show love, respect, and consideration for all those involved. Focusing on three key areas helped us build a united family together.

COMMUNICATING

Blending our family began long before the wedding day. Early on, we encouraged our children to offer their suggestions for a successful transition. We learned that if we listened, what they said and the feelings behind it gave us clues to know what to do. We took to heart this counsel given by Elder Marvin J. Ashton (1915–94) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: “To be effective, family communication must be an exchange of feelings and information. . . . Differences should not be ignored, but should be weighed and evaluated calmly.”¹

Some of our best talks came in informal settings. On one occasion, we were on a drive with a niece and two of our daughters. I took advantage of the moment and asked, “What advice can you give Marty and me for blending our families?”

My niece suggested we focus on the eternal perspective and not worry about the little things. With this in mind, we tried to find humor, rather than tension, in little annoyances. For example, one of my daughters was excited that Marty had a guitar. The instrument often went missing from its usual spot, appearing “mysteriously” in her bedroom next to some beginner guitar books. Rather than getting

upset, Marty would jokingly ask if he could borrow his guitar. His actions communicated support for her interest rather than frustration with her lack of respect for his belongings.

My daughters said they didn’t want their stepfather to tell them what to do. Marty and I decided that he would refrain from disciplining my children, asking them to do chores, or making decisions about their social activities. If something needed to be done, I would ask my children to take care of it. If they wanted to spend time with friends, they would ask me for permission. If they needed correction, I would be the one to correct them. Marty resisted the urge to interject his opinions during some heated discussions. When I needed his input, we discussed the situation privately.

This arrangement was not easy—and it might not be the best approach for all blended families—but it worked well for us. It provided a tension-free period for my kids to develop a positive relationship with their stepfather. Marty and I anticipated that the kids would eventually warm up to him and accept his direction, and we were right. After about a year, they started talking directly to Marty about their activities. He had earned their trust and respect, and from then on, Marty had an active role in guiding and directing them.

BALANCING TIME

Sometimes our children spoke up without our having to ask them. We tried to give these unsolicited comments the same careful consideration. Prior to the wedding, one of my daughters blurted out that she could never be in a family again because her parents were divorced. She thought her family was destroyed and said that we would only ever be a “group.”

Marty and I realized that she was still healing from my divorce. We decided not to immediately refer to ourselves as a family. Instead, we relied once again on humor to help the situation. We held “group” home evenings, “group” prayers, and “group” dinners. Within a year this daughter started reminding us to hold *family* prayer and *family* home evening and referred to us as a family when talking to her friends.

We tried to keep the lines of communication open along the way by including a time for family business during our weekly family home evenings. Anyone could bring up concerns, and we would work together to resolve problems peacefully before the end of the evening.

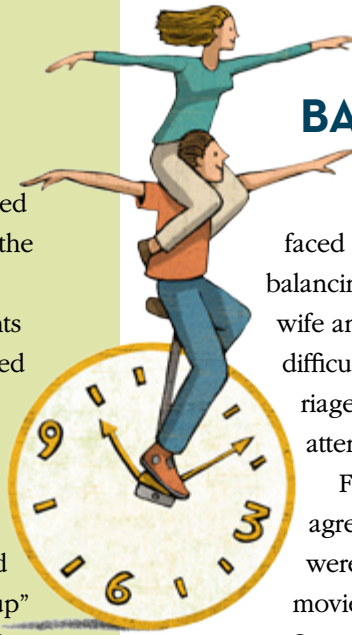
The biggest challenge Marty and I faced in blending our families together was balancing time spent together as husband and wife and time spent with our children. It was difficult to take time to strengthen our marriage and still provide each child with the attention he or she needed and deserved.

For the first year or so, Marty and I agreed to forgo date nights when the kids were at home. If we went to dinner, a movie, or a sporting event, we invited everyone. Our commitment to being home helped my kids feel secure that their new stepfather was not going to take me away from them. They knew they didn't have to compete for my attention. When the children were not with us, Marty and I strengthened our marriage relationship through weekday lunches, temple sessions, day trips, and date nights.

Marty came up with fun activities and service opportunities that gave him one-on-one time with my kids. He and my son enjoyed golfing, snowboarding, playing Ping-Pong, and working on my son's truck together. My daughters enjoyed bonding with Marty when he helped them with their homework or took them on spontaneous ice-cream or shopping trips.

We spent time as a family boating on the lake in the summer and snowboarding in the winter. We often went to the movies or out to dinner or had friends over for barbecues. On Sundays we attended church and spent the whole day together as a family.

Since my stepdaughter was attending college out of state, it was difficult to find time to spend with her. Sometimes Marty went by himself to visit her, and other times I joined him. She had a busy schedule, but when we were with her, our time together was always enjoyable.



TIPS FOR UNITING A BLENDED FAMILY

- Encourage open communication.
- Don't fret over the little things.
- Use humor to defuse tension.
- Build relationships with the children before disciplining.
- Don't compete for attention.
- Make time for one-on-one relationship building.
- Serve together, work together, learn together.

STRENGTHENING TESTIMONIES

Marty was not a member of the Church when we first met on a blind date. But early on he showed interest in learning more about the gospel, and I felt impressed to pursue my relationship with him. Much of our courtship included gospel discussions and missionary lessons in my home. Marty joined my children and me at church on Sundays and came to our home for family home evening.

As my children answered Marty's questions, they became more confident in their knowledge of gospel principles. Conversations about the Church became common and comfortable. He was impressed by their good examples, and they influenced his conversion.

Marty's journey in accepting the gospel touched our hearts and brought us all closer together. As my kids and I witnessed the changes in his life, we developed a deeper love for the gospel and for missionary work. We recognized and appreciated the strong presence of the Spirit in our home. My children developed tender feelings for Marty. One of them told me, "Mom, you better marry him. I just can't imagine not having him in my life." Being a part of Marty's conversion paved the way for us to unite as a blended family.

Marty was baptized after investigating the Church for six months. My children spoke and performed musical numbers at his baptism. All our testimonies were strengthened as we shared that spiritual day together. Six months later, Marty and I were married, and six months after that, we were sealed in the temple.

Both as a family and as a couple, we continue to strengthen our testimonies through temple work, service and missionary opportunities, church attendance, and gospel discussions. We also hold daily scripture study and family prayer with whoever is home.



JOY IN OUR HOME

We found that communicating, spending time together, and focusing on gospel principles were critical elements in bringing our new family together. We have also learned to humbly rely on our Heavenly Father and Church leaders for guidance and direction. With this help, we have found the joy that comes from having peace and love in our home. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

NOTE

1. Marvin J. Ashton, "Family Communications," *Ensign*, May 1976, 52.

LEARN MORE

Heidi Eljarbø Morrell Andersen, "Remarriage: An Adventure in Patience and Love," *Ensign*, Feb. 2016, 62–65.

Barbara Jones Brown, "Growing as a Stepfamily," *Ensign*, July 2005, 61–65.

Robert E. Wells, "Uniting Blended Families," *Ensign*, Aug. 1997, 24–29.